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Review: Mexican Murals and Their Meaning

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Source: *Art Journal*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (Spring, 1999), pp. 114-115

Published by: [College Art Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/777901>

Accessed: 03/01/2011 20:33

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brilliantly argued) is hardly accidental. The body is a singularly subjective space, necessarily gendered, and it stands (theatrically) in radical opposition to the posturing involved in any disinterested, objective reading of it. If art history traditionally has been a male-dominated enterprise, O'Dell and Jones renegotiate its gender. Not every reader will be pleased. Many will be put off by the postmodern critical jargon on which their arguments too often turn—particularly Jones's. But the stories these two writers tell, and the images they reproduce, nevertheless suggest that their revisionary critical practices are not only justified but revelatory.

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## Mexican Murals and Their Meaning

Anthony W. Lee

**Leonard Folgarait. *Mural Painting and Social Revolution in Mexico, 1920–1940: Art of the New Order*.** New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998. 288 pp., 18 color ills., 99 b/w. \$65.

Since their heyday in the twenties and thirties, Los Tres Grandes—José Orozco, Diego Rivera, and David Alfaro Siqueiros—have been the object of a steady stream of critical texts, popular biographies, reminiscences of an often anecdotal and aphoristic sort, and more serious scholarly essays. There have also been numerous small exhibitions, large retrospectives, and symposia, and the artists themselves have even been the subjects of murals. In Mexico, the stream never really slowed, since the three were always somehow bound to the Revolution and its great promises and to the founding of a modern nation and its violent entry into a new kind of modernism. North of the border, attention to their work has sometimes slowed to a trickle (symbolized by the covering over in the fifties of Rivera's great *The Making of a Fresco* at the San Francisco Art Institute), though since the sixties, when a model for a politically conscious art had considerable resonance for many, that stream has continued to widen.

The serious study of the Mexican Mural Renaissance has undergone something of a renaissance itself in recent years. This should be no real surprise, since the basic contours of that moment accord so neatly with many interests current in the academy. The work is ripe for a certain kind of postcolonial analysis, for example, in which the overthrow of colonial rule, the competing ambitions in the new state, and the debated and debatable recovery of a pre-Conquest past are all written on Mexico's very walls. This work can also stand a revisionist analysis of modernist art, where the characteristic forms of European painterly models were put through different paces and where, arguably, a robust, alternative form held sway. And

perhaps this work is most ready for a new leftist argument, to reexamine what others have casually assumed—that the murals were indeed bound to the Revolution in the most politically and socially fecund senses of that word. What, indeed, was revolutionary about them, and what “image of the people” did they offer?

Those last are the questions that Leonard Folgarait, associate professor of fine arts at Vanderbilt University in Nashville and author of *So Far from Heaven: David Alfaro Siqueiros' "March of Humanity" and Mexican Revolutionary Politics*, tries to answer in his new book. This book provides an intensely pointed analysis about the actual revolutionary meanings in the muralists' work. About the paintings' notorious image of the people, he reasonably asks whose image we might mean. For there was no “revolution” in the era of the Mural Renaissance, if by that we mean civil war and the potential for real historical transformation in the social order. Instead, the murals were painted during what the author calls the post-Revolution, a period in which successive politicians vied for control, the energy of widespread unrest was channeled into nation making, and the Revolution itself was propped up as a historical event, securely in the past, to legitimate less-than-revolutionary social and political activities. “Post,” in this sense, not only means “after” in a chronology of historical and social events, but also a belated leftist ideology and, more critical still, a thoroughgoing negation of the revolutionaries' most cherished dreams by those positioned to patronize art. In a climate such as this—of recuperation and consolidation, of “hegemonic institutionalization” (6)—the murals did not participate in the Revolution but in its happy myth making.

The author's argument moves quickly between the macrotheater of political events and ambitions and a close reading of several murals, sometimes not pausing to mediate between the two. It is primarily hinged around extended consideration of Rivera's *History of Mexico* (1929–30, 1934–35) in the National Palace and Siqueiros's *Portrait of the Bourgeoisie* (1939–40) in the headquarters of the Sindicato Mexicano de

Electricistas (Mexican Electrician's Union), both in Mexico City. Folgarait has presumably chosen these two works for their range of oppositional terms. The first work was painted by a flip-flopping Marxist under the strong arm of Plutarco Elías Calles's regime and in the symbolic seat of government power (though the third and final wall was accomplished slightly later); the second, by a card-carrying Communist Party man during the more liberal administration of Lázaro Cárdenas and in the symbolic space of organized labor.

Rivera's *History* was thus painted when the mechanics of Mexican government still rather baldly resembled that of the prerevolutionary era. Its bureaucrats were of the same elevated class, its economy was still based on land monopoly and an increasingly industrialized form of capitalism, and its commitment to redistributing its power to the "people" remained less than enthusiastic. All of this rather familiar, if invidious, governmental behavior was masked under the logic of revolutionary ideals, and for Folgarait, the mural betrays evidence of the considerable effort to dissimulate. Not that it provides a tabulation of historical events leading naturally to the Callista regime (although it does that to a remarkable degree), but that, in its very form and insistently discursive nature, it simulates the logic of postrevolutionary ideology. On the public stage, life was "being organized by discursivity into discursivity, . . . the disembodiment of the real, three-dimensional, charismatic qualities of individuals and events into ciphers occupying a unified plane was being practiced in politics and in art" (117). The mural turns history into an accumulation of portraits. It prefers a disjunctive alignment of scenes rather than a free-flow narrative. It obeys the rigid logic of its architectural surrounds and relies on the authority of texts over the power of images to knit its congested details together. Furthermore, it provides a place where "ritual" can take place, where an initiate (the new Mexican citizen) is momentarily suspended from the quotidian aspects of life, where he can witness a society's normal paradoxes resolved and be integrated into the new order in a ceremony of formal aesthetics.

If Rivera's *History* gives the illusion of the Revolution's attainment, then, according to the author, Siqueiros's *Portrait* suggests its ramifications for the country's laboring classes. A notoriously difficult mural to apprehend, the figures and forms within the painting career wildly, compared to the more stately, overtly composed *History*. But apparently that mode of apprehension offers its viewers an aesthetic experience uncannily like that experienced by the union itself in the larger political arena. The mural sweeps us upward through its stairwell setting, past scenes of mass conversion toward a central wall devoted to gluttony and greed. It fomenters anger and calls us to arms, ultimately only to bring us face-to-face with a stagnant, rather ambivalent, and somewhat aimless revolutionary figure. The process is a metaphor for the fate of labor in the late thirties, "pulled irresistibly into a final and static social slot, and subjected to the hub of official power" (189). Cárdenas-style reformism stripped the working classes of revolutionary consciousness in favor of "conflict consciousness" (183), the latter far more economically than politically driven, more like a trade union than a revolutionary collective.

Folgarait's interpretations are ingenious, innovative, and virtually unprecedented readings in the critical literature, and Mexican mural studies will benefit immensely from them. With diagrams and many new reproductions, the book therefore is as useful to the new student as it is for the veteran of the social history of Mexican art. That is not to say there aren't quibbles, both small and large, but it is a rare pleasure indeed to be able to quibble about analyses of the murals at such a new, sophisticated level. For example, ironically, despite their ostensible differences in subject matter and in the physical and patronage conditions of their making, Rivera's and Siqueiros's murals seem to amount to the same thing. They were "the visual component of [the] need to create that Mexican citizen necessary for the survival of the post-Revolutionary state," the "official intrusion into political consciousness and social life" (195). That sameness of meaning in two very different works of art

is the result of a most severe application of hegemony and the Jamesonian political unconscious as interpretive models. It can cause a certain over-determinism of conclusion. Folgarait does not tackle any of the other paintings in the Calles and Cárdenas years (he looks quickly at a few in the preceding Alvaro Obregón years), but one suspects that a discussion of them would be variations on a theme. In such a universe, there is little room for effective dissent or even meaningful counterdiscourse. In this universe of despair, where subject positions are assumed to be granted by ritual and the crowds are assumed to be passive witnesses, the Revolution and its ambitions can of course become mere representations. But we might like to know how people consumed these images; how the murals effected precisely the flat citizenship asked of their viewers; and how, surely, the crowds' ambivalence or even its dissent might have generated critical distance.

The task of uncovering the effects of postrevolutionary murals is difficult and often must be accomplished through seismic measuring. In lieu of that, it is a remarkably all-or-nothing world that Folgarait ends up creating, between the dream of a socialist political order and its loss and morbid aftermath. With the end of war and its fervent illusions, the postrevolutionary creed becomes strangely, curiously everywhere, so durable a frame of reference that, because there is only one possibility of meaning, murals must inevitably find their most trenchant and devastating purposes.

Anthony W. Lee is assistant professor of art history at Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Massachusetts, and the author of *Painting on the Left: Diego Rivera, Radical Politics, and San Francisco's Public Murals*.